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ABSTRACT

Such topics as death, divorce, old age, poverty, crime, racism, and handicaps are becoming the subjects of novels for young people and of picture books for children. If these books are to help children deal with social issues, conflicts, and concerns, they should foster realistic rather than stereotypical attitudes. Many books, for example, portray elderly people in negative terms that influence children's attitudes toward older people. Many books for children are permeated with sexism and stereotypical characters, including negative portrayals of women and misrepresentations of blacks and American Indians and their cultures. Divorce is also a current topic in children's literature, but the stereotype of the nuclear family often presented in the books is becoming less relevant in real life. On the positive side, children's literature dealing with the disabled can help children become accustomed to handicapped people, an important goal as mainstreaming of handicapped students increases. In addition, books concerning death can help children cope with terminal illness or death of relatives. The careful evaluation of books on each of these topics can eliminate those containing misrepresentations that may distort a child's view of society and people. (HTH)

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SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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There are many sociological changes taking place in today's society. We live in a world where over three million children have divorced parents, where ethnic minorities are still being discriminated against, and where more people than ever before are reaching old age and facing the problems of the elderly. Because of new laws, children with handicaps, who were once isolated from "normal" children, are now being mainstreamed into the regular classroom situation. It is no wonder that a large percentage of the school children of our country face more conflicts than ever before.

Singer (1977) gives books credit for being a powerful medium through which young people can work out some of their conflicts and concerns and through which they can learn about solutions and alternatives for their particular dilemmas.

Today's children's literature is dealing more and more with current issues. Social problems are now being handled openly in children's books. Such topics as death, divorce, old age, poverty, crime, drug abuse, mental illness, racism, and handicaps are becoming the subjects of novels for young people and, to some extent, of picture books for children.

If, then, we are going to rely on children's books to help students in dealing with social issues, problems, conflicts, and concerns, we need to take a closer look at the literature which has been published and that which is being written at the present time.

For example, how true are the following statements? Women should cook and clean and let the men earn the living. Old people are tired, grouchy, and senile. Blacks like grits, greens, and watermelon. American Indians existed only in the past and were a savage lot. "Good" families have a

mother, father, children, a pet, and a nice home in the suburbs. Handicapped people should associate only with their own kind.

These are shocking statements--statements that arouse deep emotions in most of us because we do not believe such stereotypic overgeneralizations. However, we are all aware that for many years these were the pictures portrayed in movies, on television programs, and in books. It is even more alarming to think that these same stereotypes are found in children's books. In fact, one does not have to search very hard to find this kind of thing in books on the shelves of school libraries today.

The books children read are generally believed to influence their attitudes. In light of this, children should have access to books that foster realistic rather than stereotypic attitudes.

Lystad (1976) states that children's books reflect the attitudes and values of the existing generation. One can see, she says, the hopes and concerns our society holds for its young people and for its own future through America's children's books. She goes on to note that changes in book content throughout our country's history reflect changes in people's feeling about what is significant in the world they live in.

During the next few minutes let us examine the various ways in which authors approach six of the major themes being written about in current literature for children. The topics which have been selected for discussion are: Death and Old Age; the Female; the Black; the Native American; Divorce; and the Handicapped.

One of the issues being dealt with in children's books is that of Old Age. Seefeldt and others (1978) tell us that human beings share

an aversion to old age and that schools can provide information and experiences that will challenge society's stereotypes and develop realistic and accurate attitudes toward aging and the aged. This same author goes on to impress upon us the importance of exposing the child to books that focus on older persons in diverse roles, activities, and life styles, rather than limiting the child's exposure to the elderly in the role of grandparent or facing death or illness. Older people are of value to society and can and do lead productive, creative lives. Yet, children are rarely exposed to an older person portrayed in this role.

Taylor (1980) reports on a study of the aged in 100 children's picture books published between 1950 and 1974. This study was conducted by Phyllis Winet Barnum and in it she found that only 3% of the main characters, as well as 3% of all characters, were elderly and that old people were found in only 5% of the illustrations. Barnum observed that the aged were portrayed as more passive, less healthy, less self-reliant and limited in their social lives. Their jobs required less mental acuity, and they showed an absence of emotions.

It is also reported by Taylor (1980) that a study by Carol Seefeldt revealed negative attitudes about older people are common. Some of the stereotypic attitudes revealed in her study are that old people are: generally ill, tired, not sexually interested, mentally slow, grouchy, withdrawn, self-pitying, isolated, and unproductive.

Apparently children believe these stereotypes because Seefeldt's study of the attitudes of 180 children from 3-11 years old revealed negative impressions of old people. Children tended to categorize the elderly as sick, tired, and ugly, and this led to a distaste and disgust at the idea of growing old themselves. Since only 39 could identify

an older person they knew and since children's contact with older relatives was usually quite limited, it appeared that their attitudes reflected cultural stereotypes rather than personal experiences. This stereotyping of old people is called "ageism."

Ansello (1978) says that stereotyping of old people (ageism) suggest that, like racism and sexism, constrained expectations, roles, and behaviors are assigned to a group of people simply because of a characteristic of their group. He also writes that because we educators, like the rest of society, have internalized negative expectations and associations regarding aging, we have unwittingly helped to perpetuate these attitudes in children in the preprimary and primary grades.

According to Wexler (1978) writers of children's books have made increasingly more efforts to include old characters in the past ten years with the rise of the "ageism" consciousness. Some authors have gone so far as to portray old people as supergrandmas who arm wrestle, stay up late, and drink root beer.

There is still a long way to go before older people appear naturally and realistically in children's literature as Wexler (1978) points out. She emphasizes the fact that often when current children's literature reflects old people at all, it gives them a grossly distorted view which is a disservice to everyone who lives beyond middle age. With over 14 percent of the current population over the age of sixty, it is unrealistic to present old people in such a distorted way.

Death, too, is now being written about in children's books. Sadker, Sadker, and Crockett (1976) state that children see 18,000

deaths on television by the age of 14 and yet they are not allowed to see terminally ill parents or grandparents in hospitals or nursing homes. According to these writers, death should be part of a child's education. Yet, schools do not give any specific instructions or preparation for the end of life, although it is something in which each person must participate.

Children have many questions concerning death, and it is the opinion of some writers that children not only need to know about death, but that they have a right to know. Literature for children is already making progress in helping children become aware of death and its meaning. Sadker and others (1976) believe that children's books, if written with sensitivity and understanding, can reduce tensions for those children who must deal with death. These books can also help develop empathy in chidlren who have not yet been affected by death.

Death is not new in children's literature. The Puritans frequently wrote about death in order to frighten children into good behavior. An obsession with death continued throughout the 19th century. Then in the early part of the twentieth century the subject disappeared almost entirely from children's books. However, during the last ten years the topic has emerged again in literature for children. It is the belief of some writers that good children's authors can help children gain a richer appreciation for the value of life as they learn to accept death.

Another topic under much consideration in children's literature today is that of sexism. Tibbetts says that "during recent years, numerous articles have asserted that children's reading material is

permeated with sexism (1978, p. 165)." She goes on to say that many authors have described sexist content as that which 1) presents more male than female characters; 2) portrays males in more, and a wider variety of, occupations than females; 3) depicts a majority of female characters in passive, subordinate, and incompetent roles, and a majority of male characters in active, dominant, and capable roles; 4) attributes desirable personality traits to males and undesirable ones to females; and 5) presents females as people to be belittled and denigrated. This same author contends that the widespread concern with the sexist content of children's reading materials stems from a belief that what we read can affect what we believe about the world and ourselves.

The Committee on Sexism and Reading of the International Reading Association (1977) has developed a checklist to assist in analyzing educational materials for sex stereotypes and related language usage. The checklist includes the following questions:

1. Are girls and boys, men and women, consistently represented in equal balance?
2. Do boys and girls participate equally in both physical and intellectual activities?
3. Do girls and boys each receive positive recognition for their endeavors?
4. Do boys and girls, fathers and mothers participate in a wide variety of domestic chores, not only the ones traditional for their sex?
5. Do both girls and boys have a variety of choices and are they encouraged to aspire to various goals, including nontraditional ones if they show such inclination?
6. Are both boys and girls shown developing independent lives, independently meeting challenges and finding their own solutions?
7. Are women and men shown in a variety of occupations, including nontraditional ones?
8. Do characters deprecate themselves because of their sex? Do others use denigrating language in this regard?
9. Do the illustrations stereotype the characters, either in accordance to the dictates of the text or in contradiction to it?
10. Is inclusionary language used? (For example, "police officer instead of policeman."

Rudman (1976) tells us that children are being exposed to many books that convey racist and sexist attitudes, and these attitudes gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. Rudman believes you should show a child how to detect racism and sexism in a book.

A problem in choosing modern literature for today's children is that of selecting ethnic literature which is honest and authentic and yet without racial stereotypes. Carlson (1979) states that books about ethnic groups should be honest, authentic, lack negative stereotypes, and present a true picture of the racial identity of the principal characters. According to her, authors should not present characters as inferior because they represent a different culture or a different way of life.

Many books about Blacks carry two dominant themes according to Bresnahan (1976). She notes that these two themes are that of the fatherless Black family and that of interracial harmony of friends, schools, marriages, and neighborhoods. The author goes on to point out that some books depict Black men as shiftless heads-of-household. All of this is in spite of the fact that some white families are without fathers and that some white males are shiftless heads-of-household.

There have been some requests for the banning of some books about the Black. One such book is Little Black Sambo. Yuill (1976) reminds us that although this little book appears quite harmless on the surface, stereotypes and caricatures appear in most earlier versions. She takes note that characters in the book had big lips, large white eyes, and a curly head of hair. Mumbo was shown as a fat, barefoot Aunt Jemima. In spite of all of this, thousands of copies are still

being sold annually.

There are five simple questions Bresnahan (1976) suggests we ask ourselves when considering books about the Black: 1) Does the book honestly portray the people? 2) Does the book rely on caricature and stereotype of Black Americans in its illustrations? 3) Do Blacks occupy menial positions in the story? 4) If the author is attempting to use dialect, does he represent it accurately? 5) Does the author avoid using words that carry negative connotations for Blacks?

Rudman (1976) includes the following criteria in her discussion of evaluating children's books. These are called "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Books for Racism and Sexism," and were compiled by the Council on Interracial Books for Children, Inc. This list includes the following:

1. Check the illustrations.
2. Check the Story Line.
3. Consider the Effects of the Book on the Child's Self-Image and Self-Esteem.
4. Consider the Author's or Illustrator's Qualifications.
5. Look at the Copyright Date.
6. Determine the Author's Perspective.
7. Note the Setting. (This criterion was added by Rudman.)
8. Note the Relationships. (This criterion was added by Rudman.)
9. Watch for Loaded Words.
10. Note the Heroes and Heroines.

The above guidelines should be most helpful in helping both children and adults in selecting unbiased books on the Female and the Black.

With all the talk of the new realism in children's books, Fisher (1974) reminds us that there is still little available literature dealing with the problem of Native Americans as members of a minority group today. According to her, most books treat American Indians as though they are only of the past. Three fourths of children's fiction has treated the Indian historically. The other one fourth has been

published more recently. Besides giving the impressions that Indians were in the past, other impressions have also been given. Fisher (1974) notes the following characteristics attributed to the Native American in many children's books: 1) that Indians were a solemn lot with little humor; 2) that the no-nos of Indian etiquette are pointing; 3) that the ultimate accomplishment in Indian culture was the successful completion of the manhood-initiation tests; 4) massacres were common; 5) most Indians were captives of other tribes at some point of time in their lives; 6) most had white captives; 7) that those who were not captured were destined to have a blood brother friendship with a white which superseded other loyalties or were singled out to bring power of the white medicine to his people in the form of guns, medical science, written language, magnifying glasses, or iron cooking pots; and 8) the number of boys who became chief was unbelievable.

Numerous articles have been written concerning the distortion of Indian images in literature for children. Herbst (1975) states that 1) the Indian is often portrayed as inferior to the white culture so his life may be improved if he abandons his Indian way of life; 2) he is a savage; and 3) quaint and superficial treatment is given without any depth or warmth.

Byler (1974) feels that: "There are too many books featuring painted, whooping befeathered Indians closing in on the many forts, maliciously attacking 'peaceful' settlers or leering menacingly from the background; too many books in which white benevolence is the only thing that saves the day for the incompetent childlike Indian; too many stories setting forth what is "best" for American Indians (1974, p. 24)."

It is also the feeling of Byler (1974) that too many stories

for young children are about little boys running around in feathers and headbands, wearing fringed buckskin clothing and moccasins, and carrying bows and arrows.

It is pointed out by Fisher (1974) that few books carry warmth for the Indian of the past as an individual or for his culture, but most of them do carry respect for both. Some do show despair caused by changes in the culture or the destruction of the Indian way of life. One of the signals of respect for Native Americans is the care that the author takes in detail. Other criteria to look for in books about Native Americans include the following:

1. Details should be accurate.
2. Values conveyed should reflect as closely as possible the attitudes of the real-life counterparts of the characters.
3. Labels should be avoided. (The label Indian is not an accurate one, and it is objectionable to some groups.)
4. Tribal ways should not be compared unfavorably with those of Whites.
5. Avoid the use of objectionable words such as strange or savage.
6. Patronizing statements should be avoided.
7. Historical facts should be presented in perspective.

Children's literature can convey false impressions and reinforce stereotyped images and conceptions. Selections with careful attention to ethnic consciousness and literary quality can make available for children books which build a greater appreciation and respect for both the Native American individual of today and for his past and his culture.

Another issue we are seeing more and more in recent children's books is that of divorce. Zwack (1973) tells us that changing life styles have resulted in a variety of marriage and family forms. This author points out that the nuclear family is no longer the only form for child rearing and that there are indications that experimentation

with different types of living arrangements will increase in the future. Statistics indicate that one parent, no parent, communal, and common law families are increasing in numbers throughout society. The stereotype of the nuclear family as found in most children's literature is becoming less relevant to the real life situation of many pupils in both rural and urban classrooms says Zwack (1973).

Zwack (1973) also writes that since existing children's literature cannot be changed, it is up to the classroom teacher to ensure that pupils are made aware that stereotypes exist in children's books and that there are alternatives to the projected lifestyles. It is particularly important to help those children who must deal with divorce.

Rudman (1976) suggestes the following criteria in looking at books which deal with divorce: 1) Fictional books should have more than the issue of divorce to carry its readers' interest; 2) It should be noncondescending and jargon-free; 3) It should communicate children's feelings and suggest some effective ways to deal with them; 4) The topic should be handled realistically; 5) It should refrain from establishing guilt for the divorce; 6) The "happy" ending of the parents' being reunited as a result of the child's behavior should be avoided. 7) It should grant the child his or her feelings and should provide options for everyone involved.

In October of 1977, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) became effective. The passage of this law reinforced a movement to integrate mildly handicapped children into the regular classroom. Greenbaum (1980) tells us that this popular educational trend is known as mainstreaming, and it means that more children with

handicaps will be in classes with their nonhandicapped peers for at least part of the school day. According to Greenbaum (1980), as these children go into the classroom, the teachers need to encourage nonhandicapped children to understand and accept these new students as peers and friends.

Greenbaum (1980) goes on to remind us that teachers and students need accurate information about handicapped people so that the children can understand one another as persons who share human emotions and experiences and who appreciate each others' differences. Sensitive teachers are needed to help children accept handicapped conditions as a part of life. This author also points out that one effective way to prepare for mainstreaming is to use children's literature. She encourages the use of trade books to provide factual information. These books offer an opportunity to see a child with a disability as a whole person, regardless of the label "handicapped". They give children a chance to realize that all children, regardless of disability, share similar feelings and interest, and that each is a unique individual, according to Greenbaum (1980).

This author also reminds us that careful thought as to the appropriateness of a book before using it is needed. If there is a doubt about it, she suggests that a handicapped person or parent of a handicapped child be asked to review it or that a special educator who is sensitive to the issues raised in it take a close look at it. Although some books are offensive, some less than ideal books may be used by a creative teacher, says Greenbaum.

Some of the subjects now being written about in children's

literature include mental retardation, cerebral palsy, blindness, slow learners, impaired hearing, use of prosthesis, autism, paraplegics, emotionally disturbed children, learning disabilities, and physical size.

Greenbaum and others (1980) offer several guidelines which should be considered in evaluating children's books about the handicapped: 1) The book should consider the whole person, not merely the effects of the handicap. 2) The book should talk about the person's feelings, both about her/his handicap and about other aspects of her/his life as well. Positive as well as negative emotions should be included. 3) The book should picture the person in a variety of settings, some where the handicapping condition influences activities and several where it is incidental. 4) The book should show the handicapped person interacting with nonhandicapped persons. 5) The book should be factual and realistic. 6) The book should not encourage the reader to pity the handicapped person. 7) The book should encourage the reader to accept and respect handicapped persons. 8) Illustrations (preferably photographs) should be clear and realistic. 9) The right of the handicapped person to as normal a life as possible should be stressed. 10) The books should emphasize that the handicapped person is more <u>like</u> than unlike his/her peers.

Lystad predicts that "in the next century, interest in the child as a being will very likely continue, with interest in individual differences among children increasing as pressure for social change mounts from women and minorities. Such eventualities will be reinforced by child-development specialists and by educators, who advocate more meaningful reading fare so children will be inclined to learn to read and to learn to interact with their society (1976, p.39)."

As we think ahead to the coming years, which undoubtly will bring us more and more children's books on social issues, let us remember that not every book rolling off the press is equal in quality and literary value. By keeping informed and by developing an awareness of the books our children are reading, we can provide them with a variety of the very best literature.

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